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THE PRESIDENT'S DEATH AND ITS LESSONS.

A DISCOURSE

ON SUNDAY MORNING, APRIL 23d, 1865,

BEFORE THE

SECOND UNITARIAN SOCIETY

OF PHILADELPHIA,

BY ITS PASTOR,

WILLIAM L. CHAFFIN.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

PHILADELPHIA:
KING & BAIRD, PRINTERS, No. 607 SANSOM STREET.
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DISCOURSE.

"The Lord is righteous in all His ways."—Psalm 145: 17.

Only in the spirit embodied in some such high saying as this, can we find relief for the sorrows and anxieties awakened by the sad calamity which fills our thoughts to-day. Though we may not clearly see the providential meaning of this event, yet we fall back upon our faith, in the assurance that it has a place in the wise designs of God.

More than a week has already passed since the shocking intelligence first reached us, and we seem hardly yet to have realized the terrible fact. But now we have present a most solemn witness of it; for all that was mortal of our lamented President sleeps with us to-day, and our city is hallowed by the presence of the honored dead.

And where could those remains rest with greater fitness than in Independence Hall, where the idea of universal liberty, to which he was so true, found its highest expression and noblest endorsement? Upon the genial face of the great Emancipator look down the pictures of the heroes and statesmen of another age. Washington and Jefferson, Franklin, Lafayette and their compatriots, imaged on the canvass, greet the form of their illustrious descendant, sculptured by God in mortal clay. And there stands that old bell,

more vocal in its silence now than when, in seventy-six, it first rang out the glorious declaration of "Liberty to all," which was only a *prophecy*, until Abraham Lincoln made it a *fact*.

Almost a century intervenes between that prophecy and its near fulfilment—a century of what varied hope and despair, of moral degradation and disaster, but now of hopeful promise! Let those who pass by that lifeless form, surrounded by such glorious associations, while the tokens of these two eras—of the nation's birth and re-birth—are before them, gratefully remember the part he has borne in inaugurating our new and better future.

Now that our feelings are more subdued, we can consider this sad event more calmly and reasonably than before. The first shock was so sudden and terrible as almost to paralyze us; then wild grief for the great loss mingled or alternated with indignant rage at the wicked murder; then succeeded Sunday, and with one accord men sought the churches, in the natural sense of dependence on the King of nations, and seeking comfort from on high; and then came the re-birth of faith and hope in the acknowledgment of Divine Sovereignty, with a disposition to look upon this event as in some way necessary to His plans, or, at least, sure to be over-ruled for good. And it is with wonderful unanimity that men have sought its providential reason in the fact that, though the talents and disposition of our late Chief Magistrate fitted him in a remarkable manner to lead us through the fearfully trying time of civil war, yet a more stern and uncompromising sense of justice is necessary for the great work that now awaits accomplishment, and for which

his successor, Andrew Johnson, seems peculiarly adapted. For, like the patriarch Abraham, his namesake, who prayed that Sodom might be spared if only fifty, thirty, twenty—nay, if but *ten* righteous men should be found therein, so he, through his kindly nature, was in danger of letting mercy triumph over justice—a course which would have been full of peril to the future of our country. If this be so, then, harsh as the words may sound, he was removed at the best time for his own fame and his country's good.

But in criticising him on this ground as the President, do we not render him honor as a man? In saying he was too kind and forgiving to be rigorously just as the Executive officer, do we not bring him nearer our own affections? To err is human, but to err by too great kindness and good-will is almost divine. How wonderful it is that though from so many quarters he was maligned as a tyrant and the cause of terrible disasters, yet never does he degrade the moral sublimity of his character by any recrimination. While the Rebel Chief vents his impotent rage in calumnious insult and abuse, which make his state-papers disgraceful tirades, the tone of our leader was dignified and manly.

Have we ever sufficiently realized how much the absence of hateful passions on our part, in the conduct of the war, may be owing to this very fact?

Civil war tends always to excite the worst feelings and passions, and never were provocations greater than we have endured; yet, under the calm and humane leadership of our departed President, we have been saved from such an evil spirit. While the Southern people were wrought to frenzied madness by the

insane appeals of their rulers, we have had an example of calmness and forbearance before us which has held our passions in powerful check—and such a cool, self-poised and almost passionless man, is most needed in a time of such stormy strife and tumult.

We are not called upon at this hour—when of all times our words should be most sacredly true—to render to Abraham Lincoln indiscriminate praise. Like all men he had his faults and his limitations. There were times when he could doubtless have effected more by measures different from those he adopted—no one perhaps saw that, at last, more plainly, or would more freely confess it, than he. To pass through such an unprecedented crisis without mistakes would have been a miracle, and our wonder is that he made so few.

But we are to judge of one's character by his cherished purposes; and we shall all, I think, agree that his country's good was the supreme law of his life and action as President. He did his duty as fast as he saw it to be his duty, neither hurried into measures of whose wisdom he was not certain, nor restrained from them when he thought them necessary. We have often chafed under and rebuked his *slowness*, but when we remember, my friends, those trying times when there were disaster in the field and dangerous divisions at home, *when one false step might have been fatal*, does not that deliberateness seem most essential? Is it not a grand spectacle to see that careful man, with such a tremendous responsibility resting upon him—aware of many dangers hidden from us—feeling his way out of the darkness with such shrewd circumspection and conscientious prudence? Why, friends,

any one can criticise this careful management and call it timidity and weakness; but believing, as I do, that there were times of greater national peril than we could know—when the storm not only burst upon us from without, but a threatening volcano slept beneath our feet, and one untimely measure might have undone the nation—I feel called upon as never before to render my grateful and affectionate homage to President Lincoln—who was timid and hesitating and deliberate only because of the just fear that an opposite policy might have precipitated national ruin. And there can be little doubt that, in a government such as ours, and more especially at such a crisis, his policy is by far the safest and surest.

And then as to the results. Here we are brought on by his administration nearly to the close of this gigantic rebellion—with the nation growing in respect abroad, with the shouts of victories greeting us from every quarter, and our progress in arms only paralleled by the wonderful march of great principles to their practical results. And all this in about four years! No one can tell now whether this could have been accomplished sooner or not; but as you contemplate the results, does it not look more like the work of forty than of four years? Our first Revolution, which seems a mere skirmish compared to this civil war, continued seven years—left us impoverished, and still a slaveholding people. This great struggle, sure to close in much less time, leaves us prosperous, and finds us a free people, with a future of vast and brilliant promise.

Let us be thankful for these great results, and not withhold our generous praise from the man most con-

spicuous in it all. His patriotism is undoubted. His earnest, constant and prayerful desire to serve his country to the utmost cannot be questioned.

More showy and splendid talents and genius would not have been so safe in this trying time as his calm, careful wisdom—his rare and unexceptionable integrity. I challenge any one to go back four years in imagination, and, with all the uncertainties of the case, to select a man whom he would be willing to substitute in place of Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States.

The man whose sudden and cruel death has bereaved the nation's heart has gained the title of the Great Emancipator; for he has been the instrumental means of giving liberty to four millions of slaves. And this is a title for which any of the great monarchs of the world would gladly exchange all their glory; for it will make his name immortal when theirs shall be forgotten. Others have been deliverers of their country—Abraham Lincoln is the Emancipator of a race. It cannot be claimed, it is true, that he was the originator of this movement, nor of the anti-slavery spirit which prompted it. That credit must be given to others, of whom I will only mention Garrison, who deserves immortality as truly as any of our countrymen.

But when it was evident that the people desired and would approve the measure, then President Lincoln—always a servant of the people, in obedience to democratic principle—made it a law; and in the remembrance of all posterity, especially of those whom he made free, his name will be indissolubly connected with this grandest of historic movements.

The extraordinary manifestations of popular feeling during the past few days show what a deep and strong hold he has upon the national heart. We were all conscious, not only of the overwhelming sense of public calamity, but of an intimate, personal loss, as though a dear father, brother or friend lay dead in our sorrowful home. He came near us all. He was emphatically one of the people—being born in ordinary circumstances, and raising himself by persevering effort to various stations of honor and usefulness; and he was one of the people in this higher sense of being their true friend, full of warm and genial sympathies. He spoke a language they could all understand, sometimes offending the taste of the fastidious, but always speaking to the common sense and common heart. He was entirely democratic in his nature—not looking down with condescension from his lofty station, but he walked and talked with them on their own plane of life, and so he has won an unequalled place in their affections—a place now made immortal by his martyrdom.

He is not a character after the heroic style; but in his simple, droll, wise and kindly genius we can recognize a true and a genuine American style of greatness that will increase with time—*the greatness of goodness*, which stands by itself and needs not to be propped up by accidental aids of rank and title and military glory. Abraham Lincoln, the honest and the true, leaves us a stainless name, unsullied by even one blot or suspicion of evil—a name of which America may always be proud, and which she will hold in everlasting remembrance.

Dark and trying as these days have been, uncertain as we are for the future, there are yet several comforting thoughts by which we may gain strength:

I. That God exists. Many a time in history has the world seemed rushing on to ruin, but the ebbing wave soon returned with greater force and volume, and under Divine lead the race has been steadily progressing. We have been permitted to see at various times that our own seeming disasters have worked out needed results, and we have no reason to suppose that this saddest event will prove an exception to this beneficent rule. God's purposes cannot be thwarted by the hand of an assassin; for he makes the wrath of man to praise him, and works out his glorious will through the very wickedness that is arrayed against him.

We trusted much to our late beloved President: but we should be taught that our safety depends not on man, but on God. He is not straitened in his resources, and can give us another good man in the place of the one he has taken, if we need him.

Oh, friends! I believe that the Lord of Hosts is with us, and that He means to teach us that we are under the leadings of His providence; and though our mortal eyes look not upon a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, yet who can review our history through this crisis, and at this glorious time behold such an opening future, without the glad conviction that God now leads us, and, if we are faithful, will still lead us as his chosen people? The voice heard in this solemn silence declares: "Be still, and know that I am God."

II. Remember, too, that *the nation still lives.* We

were stronger on the fifteenth of April, after the news of this horrible outrage thrilled through the land, than we had ever been before. There have been some days when we were all one—when family, station, sect, party and race were all forgotten, and we were only countrymen and brothers. But never before did we so truly realize this consciousness of our essential oneness as a nation, as when we were so closely united by this great and common sorrow.

This mighty national sentiment on which our safety and success depend—more, far more than on any single man, however great and good he may be—has been revealed with surpassing grandeur by this event. Instead of being divided and in danger of disintegrating, we find that our differences are superficial and our unity essential. And where this is true in the government of the people, we are safe from any permanent disaster as the result of the loss of one or of many men, though at the head of the nation.

The experience of our people through these sad days is a complete vindication of the stability of a republican form of government. Democracy has been on severest trial during the last four years, and it would seem as though God meant to prove to all the nations that this *experiment* of self-government had become an accomplished and acknowledged *fact*. For while so sad and sudden a tragedy would be fraught with utmost danger to the monarchies of the old world, it has created no disturbance in the machinery of our republic; nor would it have done so had the heads of the various departments been assassinated, as our beloved Chief Magistrate has been. Our stability is not enforced by outward authority, but grows out of

our inherent unity; and every mad attempt like this defeats its object by uniting us better; for we are made stronger and more formidable by every such national disaster and calamity. There can be no cause for fear while we are still a nation true to high principles and made one by common sentiments.

III. And now, again, there is a sadder, but most necessary lesson, speaking to us out of this event.

It is but another illustration of the kind of men and manners which are the natural outgrowth and fruitage of the system of slavery, in the interest of which alone this dreadful rebellion was begun.

We have hardly yet begun to realize its enormity; but when its secrets are uncovered, we shall find it a very hell of reeking corruption. Possibly, by this horrible deed which bows us in sorrow to-day, God would further teach us the true character of this gigantic crime which for long years has made traffic in human flesh, caused perpetual licentiousness and barbarity, mocked heaven by groans and tears and clanking chains, and which finally flowered out into open treason, rending the country in twain, opening rivers of fratricidal blood, and darkening every household with a common sorrow. And it was but natural that it should conduct the war on the same inhuman principles; and accordingly it commits grossest outrages on loyal citizens, forcing men into the ranks at the point of the bayonet, seeking to burn our cities by the aid of debauched and hardened criminals, inaugurating a system of guerilla warfare worthy only of highwaymen, and, by systematic and persistent starvation and cruelty, committing thousands of mur-

ders of noble men, which will make the names of Libby Prison, Belle Isle, Salisbury and Andersonville enduring monuments of what a noble senator, himself a victim, has called the "barbarism of slavery."

And now this same accursed spirit incarnates itself in a ruffian who, with boldest atrocity, assassinates our beloved President, the man from whose forbearance it had most reason to hope. But, true to His universal law, God makes it its own executioner; for this deed is but the most conspicuous and closing act in a drama of suicidal madness. The war that was meant to save slavery proves its sure destruction, and this shot that murders the President pierces its own heart.

But as the rebel cause was already lost beyond recovery, and hence nothing could be gained by this act, it becomes a deed of utter malignity, maddened to satanic revenge and despair by its terrible defeat; but, by employing this murderous assassin to do its work, it shows the ruling passion strong, even in its death.

This dreadful atrocity is not to be regarded as the conception merely of a few daring men, but is to be referred back to the wicked spirit that has inspired all the leaders in this slave-holding rebellion.

As the evidence accumulates, we find that this was but one out of many, or but part of one extensive conspiracy. The assassination of the President has constantly been premeditated, was once before attempted, and a letter in the trunk of one of the murderers shows that this plan was known and countenanced at Richmond.

And so, my friends, as we bear these facts in mind, remembering that the leading rebels who begun the

war sanctioned this and other dreadful outrages, boasting that they would effect this assassination, does it not plainly appear that we are dealing, not with ordinary belligerents and enemies of war, but with a conspiracy of traitors and murderers, who seek, by the crime of bloody treason, to perpetuate that other crime of chattel slavery?

Shall not this fact determine us to extirpate, root and branch, that atrocious system which has had, and so long as it exists will continue to have, the power to inflame its minions with such madness and cruelty?

Just now we are full of angry indignation against the man who committed this foul murder, but let us remember, if he aimed at one life, those of whom he was the miserable tool have aimed at the life of the nation. Murder is one crime alone, but treason is the father of many crimes.

Our sense of justice ought not to be satisfied until we go back of this assassin, and back of the greater criminals who brought on the war, and utterly destroy this one pregnant cause of untold mischief and ruin, and render equal justice and common rights to its long abused victims.

IV. And this leads me to say, in conclusion, that this sad calamity will not be in vain if it shall arouse us to a spirit which will visit upon the authors of our national calamities the just punishment of their sins. From the start, the government has been too lenient and forgiving in its treatment of traitors; and one of our great dangers has arisen from our magnanimity; for, unmindful of the future, when elated by victory we have been willing to forgive and forget. Not to punish them with memorable penalties, is to set a

premium on treason and bid for a recurrence of rebellions in the future. It is but right that we should be roused to a state of terrible indignation, for our uncompromising severity will, in the end, be the greatest mercy.

This we demand, not in any spirit of revenge; for were the injury only a personal one, God helping us, we would say, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do."

But we are the vindicators of our country's authority, and the guardians of her safety; and our country has a *future* as well as a present, and a fearful example of the fate of treason should now be made, which will secure the future from this danger. If it costs nothing to be a traitor, there will be successive conspiracies of ambitious men, who would willingly foment discord and war, if only they might sit for a while in places of authority, or write their notorious fame on the scroll of history in letters of human blood. Even now, when we have so much reason to hope for better things, the nation's sense of justice is outraged at the honor and deference paid to prominent rebels, whose defeat has hardly abated their insolence. Instead of being allowed their liberty, which they will use to defeat justice, they should be held to answer for the dreadful crime of unprovoked treason, which began by breaking a solemn constitutional oath, continued by fearful blood-shed, and ends in a conspicuous assassination, and all this that they might have *liberty* to plant by our side a shameful, slave-holding tyranny.

The least we should demand, is, that all who have actively taken part against the government under

which they were reared, should be forever ineligible to office, and deprived of the right of suffrage; while the leading criminals should be banished to perpetual exile, or suffer the extreme penalty of the law.

On some lonely St. Helena, or desolate Siberia, let them drag out their miserable days, solemn warnings for the future, living monuments of the fate awaiting those who participate in this crime of crimes.

By the vast sacrifices that have been made, by the precious, oh! the precious blood of our slaughtered brothers and husbands, sons and fathers; by the sorrow and destitution of widow and orphan; and now, to-day, over the body of our murdered President, let us swear together in behalf of justice and in the sacred name of our dear native land, to so deal with this crime of treason and the sin which prompted it, that henceforth we may be secure and free.

And now, friends, let us render to this great and good man, whose body hallows our city to-day, the just honor that is his due. With a single heart he has endeavored to serve his country faithfully, and thereby has he earned immortal fame. Not the least of his great reward, as he looks down upon us from on high, is the knowledge of the affection he has inspired in the hearts of his countrymen. Peace to his ashes! eternal rest to his soul! May God bless and comfort his afflicted family and friends. May God sustain and bless this hardly less afflicted nation, in whose grateful memory no name will henceforth be more honored and loved than that of our dear, departed, honest and true President, Abraham Lincoln.

"One more look on that dead face
Of his murder's ghastly trace!
One more kiss, oh, widowed one!
Lay your left hand on his brow,
Lift your right hand up, and vow
That his work shall yet be done.

Patience, friends! The eye of God
Every path by murder trod
Watches, lidless, day and night;
And the dead man in his shroud,
And his widow weeping loud,
And our hearts, are in his sight.

Every deadly threat that swells
With the roar of gambling hells,
Every brutal jest and jeer,
Every wicked thought and plan
Of the cruel heart of man,
Though but whispered, He can hear.

We in suffering, they in crime,
Wait the just reward of time,
Wait the vengeance that is due;
Not in vain a heart shall break,
Not a tear for Freedom's sake
Falls unheeded: God is true.

Frozen earth to frozen breast,
Lay our slain one down to rest:
Lay him down in hope and faith,
And above the broken sod,
Once again, to Freedom's God,
Pledge ourselves for life or death.

That the State whose walls we lay,
In our blood and tears, to-day,
Shall be free from bonds of shame,
And our goodly land untrod
By the feet of Slavery, shod
With cursing as with shame."

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